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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000399

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN PATRIARCH MESROB II ON THE CHURCH,
ARMENIA, AND TURKEY

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: In a March 13 meeting, Istanbul Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II blamed Catholicos Karekin II and Armenian President Robert Kocharian for increasing tensions within the Armenian Church and criticized the Armenian Diaspora for focusing exclusively on "genocide" recognition and for ignoring Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. Mesrob admitted that the Armenian community in Turkey continues to experience problems regarding their right to own property, but dismissed it as an issue for international concern. Mesrob is also hopeful that the new single-party Justice and Development Party (AKP) government will carry through on some of its early rhetoric regarding the treatment of minority religious communities. End Summary.

Armenian Orthodox Church

2. (C) Placing the blame squarely on Etchmiadzin and Yerevan, Mesrob told poloff that tensions within the Armenian Orthodox Church are on the rise. Although personal relationships between the Catholicos and Patriarchs are good, Mesrob claimed that Catholicos Karekin II's efforts to assert his authority have caused friction with the others (Note: In addition to Catholicos Karekin II in Etchmiadzin (Armenia), there are three other hierarchical Sees in the Church: the Catholicos of Cilicia (Lebanon), and the Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Constantinople. End Note). Mesrob lamented that Karekin's election to the Catholicosate in 1999 had not been democratic, and, in fact, had been orchestrated by Armenian President Robert Kocharian. According to Mesrob, Armenians worldwide are increasingly frustrated with the Armenian government and their Church. Clearly disappointed that Kocharian was reelected March 5, Mesrob doubted whether such an outcome would have been possible without massive election fraud. Poloff told Mesrob that both the OSCE and the State Department had publicly criticized the conduct of the elections and called on the Armenian government to investigate the irregularities.

Armenians in Turkey

3. (C) As for his own community, Mesrob told poloff that his best estimates indicate that there are between 50,000 and 60,000 Orthodox Armenians in Turkey (Note: There are a few thousand Armenian Catholics as well. End Note). The Turkish government estimated that there are as many as 80,000, but Mesrob believes this number is exaggerated and may include many Armenians who have since emigrated. Mesrob reports that the population is fairly stable; there are even 100 or so new converts each year. More interesting, Mesrob offered, is the continuous stream of visitors claiming Armenian descent and varying levels of adherence to Church traditions who come to see him from all over Turkey. When he himself travels to other parts of Turkey, particularly the eastern regions, Mesrob said that he is besieged by such people. Mesrob deliberately refrains from encouraging such visits and exchanges in order to avoid the appearance of proselytization and to preserve good relations with the Turkish government. Asked to hazard a guess as to their numbers, Mesrob speculated that there might be a million or more such people who accept their Armenian roots. (Comment: Poloff has heard similar estimates from other sources as well. End Comment).

4. (C) With regard to ongoing government restrictions on the activities and rights of the local Armenian community, Mesrob admitted that in spite of recent improvements in legislation, such problems continue. Shortly before meeting with poloff, for example, Mesrob had met with local Armenians to decide whether to take legal and/or political measures in response to a decision to revoke a property deed for one of the Armenian high schools. (Note: Although Mesrob did not mention the school by name, a sympathetic March 23 article in daily Radikal suggests that he may have been referring to the Surp Hac Armenian School in Uskudar. End Note). Despite these difficulties, however, Mesrob was emphatic in emphasizing that he does not believe that this should be a

subject of international concern. In his view, U.S. and European pressure on the Turkish government has been counterproductive. "Would it make sense for Turkey to lobby the U.S. on behalf of Native Americans?" he asked rhetorically. Mesrob acknowledged that each religious minority deals with these issues differently. The Greeks, he said, favor a more confrontational approach because they feel that Ecumenical Patriarch Bartolomeos' political stature gives them more influence. Meanwhile, the Jews rely heavily on the political and financial support of a few powerful patrons within their community (including Jak Kamhi (Profilo) and Isak Alaton (Alarko)).

Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation

15. (C) Mesrob told poloff that the real obstacle to Turkish-Armenian reconciliation lies with the Armenian Diaspora. According to him, most older Turks acknowledge that the so-called "genocide" occurred, but are unable to discuss it openly. The Diaspora, however, is single-mindedly focused on recognition of the "genocide" and has no interest in Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. Mesrob also questioned Armenian President Kocharian's commitment to reconciliation, suggesting that he too may be overly influenced by the Diaspora. Mesrob told poloff that his own position is particularly delicate. He is seen by many in the Diaspora as an apologist for Turkey and by many in Turkey as an agent of Armenia. As long as he can avoid feeding these misimpressions, Mesrob assured poloff that he is personally prepared to do whatever he can to support reconciliation; he is even ready to travel to Azerbaijan for meetings with the Chief Mufti, an offer he claimed he recently made to the General Director for Religious Affairs Mehmet Nuri Yilmaz (Note: Mehmet Nuri Yilmaz retired on March 17 "under pressure" from the AK government. End Note).

Turkish Politics

16. (C) Asked whether he expected to see movement on these issues from the new Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, Mesrob remarked that they have been saying some of the right things, but that he has not seen many tangible results so far. He did note that this single-party government may be in a stronger position to effect change than the previous coalition government. Ties between the Patriarchate and the Democratic Left Party (DSP) and Motherland Party (ANAP) coalition partners in the 1999-2002 Ecevit government had been good, but the third coalition partner, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), had refused to even meet with him. Mesrob dismissed speculation that Islamic-leaning AKP may "use" the minority religious communities as an excuse and cover for loosening state control over religion to advance their "hidden" socio-religious agenda. Mesrob also doubted whether AKP would be able to undertake any bold initiatives regarding either its minority populations or relations with Armenia until after the Iraq situation is resolved.

Comment

17. (C) Much of what Mesrob said about the differences between the minority religious communities tracks closely with what we have observed. Of the three major communities, the Greeks (numbering only a few thousand) have been the quickest (and often only) ones to ask for our help in addressing property and religious training issues. The Jewish community (numbering about 22,000) explicitly prefers a non-confrontational style, which they claim has enabled them to meet the needs of their community. Perhaps because they are faced with such sensitive and unresolved issues (i.e., "genocide" and Turkish-Armenian reconciliation) and because they are caught between Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora, on the one hand, and the Turkish government and a nationalist Turkish population, on the other hand, the Armenian community here has been careful to deal with their local problems themselves without appealing for international assistance. At the same time, the three communities have cordial relations and have cooperated on a number of issues. Most recently, all three community leaders openly supported Turkey's EU aspirations. Mesrob claims that they had planned to make a joint trip to European capitals before Copenhagen, but in the end he made the trip alone (Note: His initiative was widely reported and well-received in the Turkish media. End Note).

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